

Early moderns show their staying power at Bonhams' Important Australian Art Sale

By Jane Raffan, on 15-Nov-2018

End-of-year sales are a tough bet: drained purses, buyer ennui and busy lives turn art catalogues into paperweights and auction rooms into merry-go-rounds. And so it was for Bonhams, where a low clearance of 48% was shored up by star turns from Ralph Balson, Dorrit Black and Adrian Feint, whose 9 works racked up half the hammer of \$1.127 million and helped secure 70% by value. The star piece, Balson's *Untitled* 1941 abstract (Lot 58) made \$330K, taking second place in the artist's leader board.





End-of-year sales are a tough bet: drained purses, buyer ennui and busy lives turn art catalogues into paperweights and auction rooms into merry-go-rounds. And so it was for Bonhams, where a low clearance of 39.4% was shored up by star turns from Ralph Balson, Dorrit Black and Adrian Feint, whose 9 works racked up half the hammer of \$1,034,050 and helped secure 64% by value. The star piece, Balson's Untitled 1941 abstract (above) made \$330,000, taking second place in the artist's leader board.

The Balson continued the artist's sure-footed run at auction, with this result being the third time in less than two years that his top prices have re-shuffled, eclipsing the long-standing record of \$140K (first set in 1998 and again in 2007).

Dorrit Black's work has also been ascendant, with the average price for her prints sold at auction climbing from \$10,000 in 2013 to nearly \$40,000 today. Bonhams' secured two new top-ten results for the artist from amongst its cache of twelve works on offer with provenance to the artist's estate: *Music*, 1927-28 (Lot 43 🎯), tipped over its top estimate to make \$75,000, a new highest price for the artist; the pattern repeated in *The Acrobats*, c. 1928-29 (Lot 44 🎯), which made \$55,000 (est. \$30-50K).

Towards the sale's end, a still life by Adrian Feint proved to be a sleeper; its startling result jolting alert the remnant audience (which only started out numbering 25) and providing a healthy tally top-up. Fierce competition on the phones saw (*Native Floral arrangement*), 1960 (Lot 118 🎯) tear away to make \$47,000 against a markedly conservative estimate of \$5-7K. Flatter, browner, sketchier and more sparsely composed than other bouquets from the 1940s, this result has catapulted into number two position in the artist's ranking.

Badham's landscape paintings may be rarer on the secondary market than his inner city figurative narrative pictures, but they don't command the same collector fervour. Still, his works are attracting serious attention and interest in general these days, and his view in browns of rooftops with chimney smoke blending to sky, *Hazy Morning*, 1944 (Lot 57 🎯), made \$32,000, a solid vault over its top estimate of \$25K.

A prettier landscape shot through with mauves by Elioth Gruner, *An Estuary in Summer*, 1931 (Lot 113 🎯), was contested to \$28,000 against expectations of \$15-20K, while Albert Namatjira's *Lone Gum at Mount Gillen*, 1958 (Lot 109 🎯), with a very nicely worked colour midground, pulled up just over its high-end with the hammer falling at \$26,000 in favour of art consultant David Hulme.

Earlier, and the only other Aboriginal work of art to make the top ten (coming in at no. 4), Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra's *Bush Tucker Story*, 1972 (Lot 18 🎯) was knocked down just below its top-end estimate for \$58,000. This painting last sold in 1997 for \$19,000; the current hammer price providing another useful data point in the trend lines of Stuart Centre Consignment works, with the result well above the 66% inflation rate for the period it was off the market.

Another work focussed on Aboriginal Country, John Coburn's *Central Desert Painting*, 1992 (Lot 39 🎯), made its low-end of \$65,000; a strong price for a brown picture in the artist's oeuvre, the results for most of which have stalled below \$50K.

From around the same time, but the product of a different generation, Susan Norrie's painterly *Pageant I*, 1987 (Lot 59 🎯), produced during her Moët et Chandon French fellowship and with provenance to the collection of Sir James and Lady Cruthers, soared above its upper estimate to make \$33,000 (est. \$15-20K).

In general, the contemporary works, and Indigenous works – both contemporary and artefacts – suffered poor clearances, with perhaps the greatest market disappointment being the suite of vintage photographs by Carol Jerrems (lot 63-71). Seemingly estimated on the basis of one past strong result, none sold, despite the artist's status within public collections, recent national touring exhibition (NGA 2013-2014) and commercial retrospective (2016-2017).

A similar fate befell photographic works by Michael Riley, Darren Siwes, Fiona Foley and Darren Sylvester, while Tracey Moffatt's *Scarred for Life*, 1994, made its low end of \$18,000, albeit that equalling the lowest price achieved

at auction for the full suite since its high of \$44,000 in 2002.

The big-ticket work by Rover Thomas, *Untitled (The Serpents - Juntarkal and Wungurr)*, 1987 (Lot 38 🎯), failed to find interest, despite its \$70,000 reduction in estimate from its last outing nine years ago; its ungainly dark composition no match for the revelation of former NGA director as a previous owner, and its importance within the Krilkril Ceremony genesis chronicle.

And while the humble roast chook is an Australian family dinner favourite, and deservedly so, its elevation to landscape via conceptual art didn't convince collectors with more prosaic inclinations. Robert Macpherson's *Mayfair: Cock O' the Walk*, 1993-94 (Lot 78 🎯) remained unsold at \$70-100K.

Segue to Nolan's Kelly ... the only one in the sale, a muddy *Kelly with Rifle in the Mangroves*, c. 1964 (Lot 124 🎯), was a sure bet at \$16-20K; selling for \$22,000.

Broadly accessible works, estimated \$10K and under, comprised the majority of the sale (approx. 120 lots), but only cleared around 30%, with buyers homing in on the properly estimated, punchiest and peculiar, avoiding overpriced and run-of-the-mill, for the most part.

The two gutsiest works on paper by Arkley sold; the best of the four, *Colour Study*, 1987 (Lot 31 🎯) making \$8,000. Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack's rather odd *Flight into Space*, 1958 (Lot 73 🎯), was the best performing from this core, selling for \$7,000 against a low-end estimate of \$3K, helped along, no doubt, by its AGWA loan history and calibre provenance.

Tim Johnson's rare punk work, *New Race*, 1961 (Lot 82 🎯) found a buyer at its low-end of \$4K, while his *Pini Tjapaltjarri, Papunya*, 1983 (Lot 83 🎯) was the only one (and by far the most resolved) of three works produced in the community that sold on the night, a steal at \$4,000.

The work of Gulumbu Yunupingu continued its near 100% strike rate at auction with a depiction of his universe, *Garak*, 2010 (Lot 98 🎯) selling for \$6,000, while the oft-offered strong perspectival watercolour by Wattie Karruwarra, *Untitled*, 1965 (Lot 129 🎯) was picked up for \$4,000, the same price as its last sale in 2008, and a far cry from its 2003 original outing at \$20-30,000 (unsold).

Bonhams' modest result sees the company moving around 10% of total fine art sales this year. With \$25 million more to be contested from the remaining big three, the typical post GFC annual circa \$100 million mark seems more likely than last year's bumper tally 1.5 times that figure. Bring it on!

Sale Referenced: Important Australian and Aboriginal Art , Bonhams, Sydney, 14/11/2018

About The Author

Jane Raffan runs ArtiFacts, an art services consultancy based in Sydney. Jane is an accredited valuer for the Australian government's highly vetted Cultural Gifts Program, and Vice President of the Auctioneers & Valuers Association of Australia. Jane's experience spans more 20 years working in public and commercial art sectors, initially with the AGNSW, and then over twelve years in the fine art auction industry. Her consultancy focuses on collection management, advisory services and valuations. She is the author of *Power + Colour: New Painting from the Corrigan Collection of Aboriginal Art*. www.artifacts.net.au.